



Field Notes

News from Traditional Arts Indiana

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Opacich Receives National Heritage Fellowship

Milan Opacich, born to a Croatian mother and a Serbian father from former Yugoslavia, grew up in the Calumet region of Indiana, home to south Slavic workers in the steel industry. Opacich became interested in string music at the age of four



Milan Opacich receives award from NEA president Dana Gioia.

— Photo by Jon Kay

and by the time he was fourteen, was playing country music with other members of mill working families. At eighteen, he took up the tamburitza music of his heritage, a Balkan string instrument ranging in pitch from soprano (*prima*) and alto (*brac*) to cello and bass (*berda*). After the steel industry began to decline, he joined the Gary Fire Department and set up a small

workshop in the basement of the firehouse where he built tamburitzas during down times. Today he is recognized as this nation's premiere tamburitza maker, incorporating ornamental mother-of-pearl inlay and intricate carving.

On October 1, 2004, Milan Opacich received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, DC. This award is the highest honor paid to a traditional artist in the United States. Several members of Opacich's family were present at the ceremony, along with former TAI manager Erin Roth.

Milan has participated both as a master and as a panel reviewer in TAI's Master Apprenticeship program, teaching 15-year-old John Miksich the art of tamburitza making.



Francis Geels and his apprentices tuning up for TAI Day at the Fair. — Photo by Ilze Akerbergs

Fiddles, Accordions, and Schmalzentrubers

TAI at the Fair

The Indiana State Fair was alive with the sound of fiddles as 43 contestants practiced their tunes before competing in the second annual *TAI Indiana State Fair Fiddle Contest*. Three experienced judges from different parts of Indiana evaluated and ranked their fiddling skills.



Accordioneers Mike Macchia and Walter Peters performing at TAI Day at the Fair. — Photo by Ilze Akerbergs



Left: Mason Clark watches the other contestants as he waits his turn during the TAI State Fair Fiddle contest.

Right: Sam Withers plays alone for a few minutes before mounting the stage at the TAI Indiana State Fair Fiddle contest. Sam won first prize in the 14 & below division.

— Photos by Ilze Akerbergs



Contestants came from all over the state to compete. Sam Withers of Columbus, Indiana, won first prize in the 14 & under division, while Olivia Smiley of Decatur County won the 15 & above division for the second year in a row. Vi Wickam from Evansville, Indiana, won the Old-Time Division.

Later in the week, TAI sponsored musical performances by accordionists Mike Macchia and Walter Peters as part of *TAI Day at the Fair*. Mike has just been accepted into TAI's Master Apprenticeship program to teach 16-year-old Patti Kupchik.

The Schmaltzentrubers of Goshen, Indiana, performed acoustic eclectic music. Guitar, harmonica, mandolin, and banjo provided accompaniment to tight vocal harmonies, as the three men weaved Mennonite religious hymns, traditional hollers, and American folk music into a pleasing presentation of humor and song.

Old-time fiddler Francis Geels and his grandson, Dan Krick, great grandson, Anthony Burgin, and son, Francis Geels, Jr., demonstrated what they accomplished as part of the TAI Master Apprenticeship program.

This year's *State Fair Masters* included the Farrar family, master gardeners, and Wilma Jean Swann and Martha Miller, a mother-daughter seamstress team.

Mike Farrar and his three brothers have been gardening ever since they were small children. Their father taught them to garden, in part so they would learn about hard work and managing money. Mike delights in just "watching things grow," as he and his son Bradley rototill, hoe, and weed their tomatoes, cabbage, and carrots in preparation for yet another competition at the state fair.

Seamstresses Wilma Jean Swann and her daughter Martha Miller work closely together, choosing fabrics and patterns, matching plaids, and tailoring garments. "A garment is just as good as the inside," explains Jean Swann, reflecting the skill necessary for completing a finished piece of clothing. They both have an impressive collection of silver trays representing their many wins at state and county fairs.

Traditional Arts Indiana (TAI) is dedicated to expanding public awareness of Indiana's traditional practices and nurturing a sense of pride among Indiana's traditional artists. TAI, a partnership of the Indiana Arts Commission (IAC) and the Indiana University (IU) Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, works locally with

individuals and organizations to promote and facilitate cultural documentation and public programming. The National Endowment for the Arts, the IAC, IU and private donations support the work of TAI. For more information, call (812) 855-0418, <tradarts@indiana.edu> website: <http://www.indiana.edu/~tradarts>

The TAI Team

Jon Kay, TAI Director
Inta Carpenter, IU Project Director
Ilze Akerbergs, Technical Assistant
Velma Carmichael, Office Support
Dorothy Ilgen (IAC), Advisor
Monica Peterson (IAC), Liaison
Fieldworkers 2004: Katherine Forgacs, Lisa Gabbert, Joanne Stuttgen, Ilze Akerbergs.

*The TAI Apprenticeship program:
Passing it on . . .*

TAI encourages traditional artists who are teaching an apprentice their art, to apply for the Apprenticeship program.

To apply, go to the TAI website at www.indiana.edu/~tradarts/programs/maapcriteria.htm and download an application, or contact our office.

In the Field . . .

*Fieldwork in Grant County
Wood carver Willis Hokes*

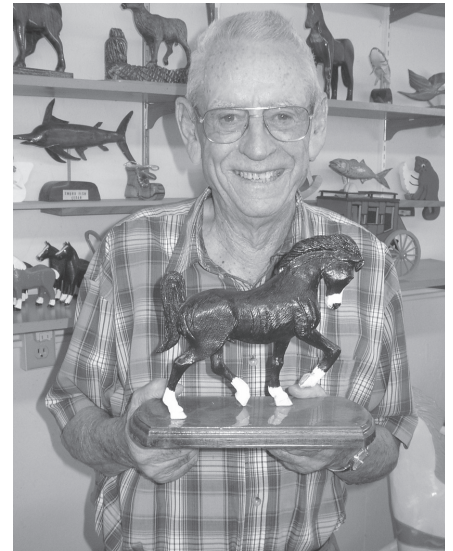
In the spring of 2004, TAI worker Lisa Gabbert conducted a field survey of Grant County. In this excerpt from her field-notes, she describes her visit with 94-year-old carver Willis Hokes.

Mr. Hokes' workshop is located in what looks to be a side addition to the garage. His workshop is filled with hundreds of different kinds of figures, including horses, fish, mules, buggies, circus scenes, bears, different types of birds, and a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round that move.

It is clear, however, that his primary passion is horses, which constitute the bulk of the figures. There were many different kinds of horses hitched to wagons and buggies, including draft horses and horses pulling plows. Most of these had people with them as well. He also carves large carousel

horses. His passion for horses clearly stems from his life as a farmer. It is what he knows and loves best, although it is somewhat surprising that he also does not carve cows as well....

Willis Hokes seems to be well known throughout the area. A couple of summers ago, he received over 150 visitors who were interested in seeing his art. A lot of these visitors find out about him through a local bed-and-breakfast. The woman who owns the B&B tells her guests about Mr. Hokes and he seems very happy to have people come and look at his art. One time he even had a whole busload of tourists come through....



Willis Hokes holding a wooden horse he carved.

— Photo by Lisa Gabbert

*Creating,
Changing, Renewing*

*Portraits of Indiana's Traditional Artists
Kenny Stone, master bluegrass fiddler*

Kenny Stone describes himself as a musical “mutt” because he plays many different styles of music — jazz, blues, country, cajun, Irish, Texas-style, old-time. But his heart has always been in bluegrass.

Born in Valparaiso in 1970, Kenny played in the family band at a very young age. “It’s the camaraderie,” says Kenny. “It’s values-oriented music.” His dad played the guitar, and Kenny would sit and try to play what he was hearing his dad sing. Often a group of people would come over to Ken’s home and sit around the kitchen table to pick some songs. “And they have pictures of me and my dad’s mandolin, which looked like a guitar. I was such a little kid – sitting in the middle of it all, strumming away, with my little cowboy hat. I thought I had to be in the center of it all.”



Master gardeners Mike Farrar and his son Bradley work in their garden as they prepare for the 2004 Indiana State Fair.

— Photo by Ilze Akerbergs



Kenny Stone, Master bluegrass fiddler, with apprentice,
Scott Conley. — Photo by Beth Campbell

As a teenager, Kenny won many competitions in his region and developed a reputation as a fine fiddle player. He started teaching when he was 17, when he gave up classical music to devote himself

to bluegrass. He encourages classical music as a foundation for his students, but bluegrass is something that has to be learned by ear. Classical music, to Kenny, felt too high-strung. “There is something about playing bluegrass or fiddle tunes ... where I could get together with some old guy underneath a tree, who is 80 years old, and maybe he didn’t play the cleanest, and maybe he wasn’t the greatest role model of what he did, but I always felt you could learn something from everyone you came in contact with.”

Kenny just finished a year-long TAI master apprenticeship award teaching 15-year-old Scott Conley bluegrass fiddle. Scott won first prize in the 2003 TAI Indiana State Fair Fiddle Contest. Kenny was also one of the judges in the 2004 TAI Indiana State Fair Fiddle Contest.